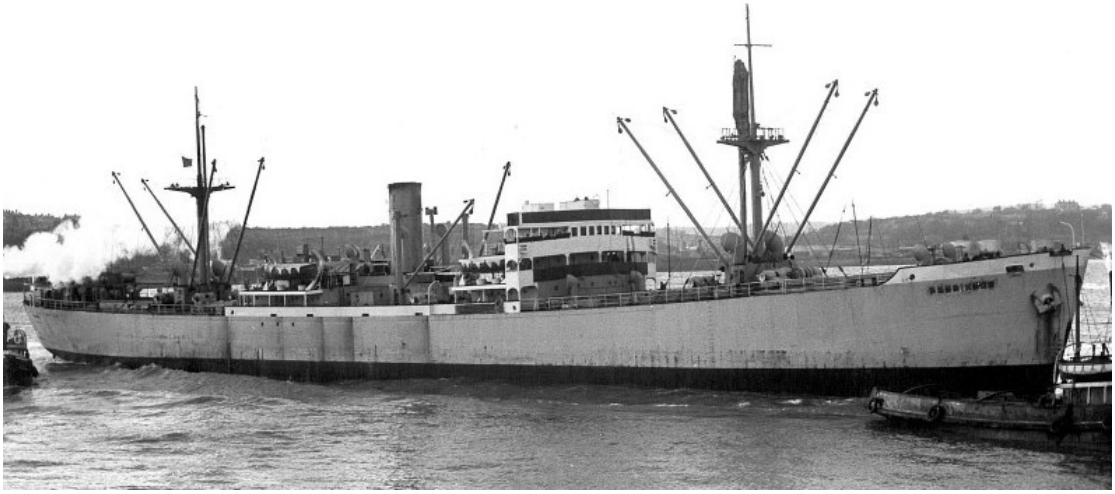
A WARTIME ADVENTURE

Log of William ‘Bill’ Davies, fireman, Merchant Navy aboard SS Ocean Volunteer August 1942 – April 1943.



SS Ocean Volunteer was a general cargo ship built in California early in 1942 for the British Government. She was one of 60 coal-fired ships built to the same design, the first of the fleet of almost 3000 Liberty ships. She survived the war and served a number of private owners under different names until she was broken up in 1963. She was 135 meters long and weighed 10500 tons. Her maximum design speed was 11 knots, about 13 miles per hour.

The Liberty ship construction program in the United States was vital to the war effort. A ship could be built in 42 days, and they were being delivered faster than the Germans could sink them. They were the backbone of the fleet supplying Britain with food and supplies from North America throughout the war. Most were oil-fired, but the Ocean class ships, the first to be ordered, were fuelled by coal.

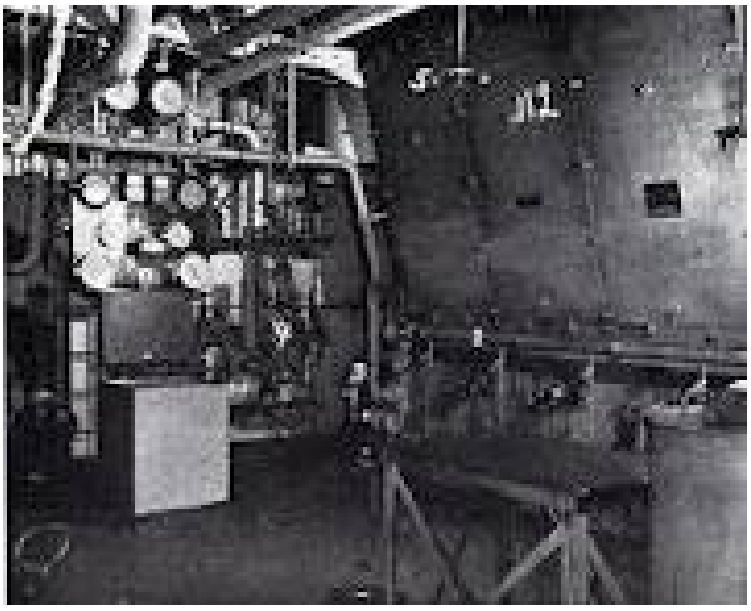
As an island nation, the United Kingdom was highly dependent on imported goods. Britain required more than a million tons of imported material every week in order to be able to survive and fight. It also needed to deliver supplies and equipment to its forces fighting overseas.

Bill Davies volunteered for war service on 18 July 1942, age 33. As an HO – a volunteer for the duration of Hostilities Only – he was given the choice of service. He chose the Merchant Navy, and was sent for training to the Fireman’s Training School in Cardiff. The training course was designed to last six weeks, with instruction on rowing lifeboats and basic seamanship, as well as boiler operation

and fuelling. As one fellow volunteer remarked - “we were taught which end of a shovel to hold”. But losses of merchant ships in the Atlantic were reaching their peak – almost 300 ships were lost in May and June 1942 alone - and the need for replacement crew was desperate. Within days Bill was in Salford, where he was quickly assigned to join SS Ocean Volunteer as a Fireman and Trimmer. His job was to keep the boilers supplied with coal, and to ensure that the unused fuel was evenly distributed about to ship to keep it in trim. Later in the war he was promoted to Engineering Officer.

Living conditions aboard a liberty ship were not good. The ten firemen shared a single cabin on deck, and worked four-hour shifts in the depths of the ship, shoveling 25 tons of coal daily from the bunkers into the boiler firebox. Food was basic but sufficient, with one pound each of meat, bread and potatoes daily and eggs twice a week. For comparison, the civilian ration back in Britain was less then one pound of meat and one egg each week.

The firemen were fuelling the boilers that heated water to produce steam under pressure. This was used not only to drive the main engine of the ship, but also to power the numerous pumps used for fresh water, toilet flushing, bilge emptying and fire fighting. The boiler room was hot and filthy dirty, with coal dust everywhere, and access to the deck was only by way of a single ladder. In the depths of the ship, the firemen were always aware that if the ship were to be torpedoed, they would probably drown before they could climb up the 40 feet of ladder needed to escape. Keeping the ship in trim involved long periods spent moving coal around in the bunkers, where the air was filled with choking coal dust.



The relative tidiness of the engine room of an oil-fied liberty ship, compared to a typical coal-fired boiler room, below.

A transcript of a hand-written log Bill kept on his first voyage.

August 1942

20 Sailed from Birkenhead for Egypt

Egypt was the Allied base for the war in the western desert of North Africa, which had been underway for over two years, and required substantial deliveries of supplies. Ocean Volunteer was listed as carrying general cargo to the Middle East, but this probably meant supplies for the Allied forces there.

21 Sailed past Scotland (Clyde) and Ireland (38 ship convoy)

For their protection during the war, merchant ships often travelled in groups of varying size, protected by an escort of Royal Navy warships. These groups were known as convoys.

22 Lost sight of land
23 Seasick for one day only near Iceland. Duke of Kent's death

Prince George, the Duke of Kent and the King's younger brother, died along with all others on board an R.A.F. Sunderland flying boat that crashed into a hillside near Dunbeath, Caithness, in Scotland while en route to Iceland. The accident actually happened on 25 August 1942.

24 Rounded Northern Ireland, sailing down west coast
25 Very homesick which is worse than seasick
26 Thinking of Edith and Kath all day. Kath's birthday (3)

Edith, often called Edie, was his wife, who he married in 1937 and who was later known by her great grandchildren as Great Big Gran. Kath was his daughter Katherine, born in 1939.

27 Very, very homesick. Afraid to write more
28 Followed by subs, dropped depth charges (7 in escort)

During the war, merchant ships were at constant risk of torpedo attack by enemy submarines, or subs as they were known. Coal-fuelled ships were particularly vulnerable because of the large amounts of smoke from their funnels, which made them easier to spot. Merchant ships carried bombs designed to be catapulted into the sea, where they were set to detonate when they reached a pre-determined depth. If they exploded close to a submarine, they could damage or sink it. These bombs were known as depth charges. The ships were also equipped with machine guns and a

heavy gun. In addition to the crew of around 40 men, the ship carried a small team of specialist operators for its armaments.

The German for submarine is Unterseeboot, literally undersea boat. This led to them being known as U-boats.

This U-boat is under attack from weapons similar to those of SS Ocean Volunteer.

29 Ditto
30 Ditto, off Gib (Gibraltar)
31 Ditto, off Gib

September

1 Followed by subs, dropped depth charges, off Gib
2 Ditto, off Morocco

The fastest route to the army bases in Egypt would have been through the Mediterranean, but this was effectively closed to Allied shipping by the Germans, necessitating an extended voyage via South Africa.
This route may well have taken the ship past the east coast of Fuerteventura. German U-boat crews often used the quiet beaches on the south of the island to rest and relax between sorties.

3 Lost subs, peace and quiet again. (Boat drill 4th time)

Boat drill was a practice of the emergency procedure to be followed if the ship was in danger of sinking and the crew needed to escape in lifeboats. It was essential to practise the drill, as it might need to be used in darkness or a time of great confusion.

4 Weather getting very hot
5 Tailed by subs again, will they get us???
6 Sunderlands turn up from Freetown and save the day

The Sunderland was a British flying boat patrol bomber developed for the Royal Air Force, and was designed to land only on water. It was one of the most powerful and widely used flying boats throughout the Second World War, and was involved in countering the threat posed by German submarines in the Battle of the Atlantic. Freetown was the capital of British Sierra Leone. The town had no airfield, but flying boats could use its harbour.

7 Sunderlands again, getting a very safe feeling
8 Convoy split up, 10 ships south, us east
9 Saw the Southern Cross in the sky

The Southern Cross is a constellation visible only in the southern hemisphere. It marks the south in the same way as the Pole Star indicates north in the northern hemisphere.

10 Saw whales, sharks, dolphins, swordfish and flying fish

11 Thinking of all at home, started taking quinine

Quinine was then the only effective treatment for malaria, a disease transmitted by mosquito bites in tropical countries.

12 Wishing Edith Kath and the boys could see these. Sent cables

The “boys” were Bill’s adult brothers, Edward, Jack and Arthur.

13 Landed at Takoradi, West Africa. Met James, a Swansea chap

This was Bill’s first step ashore in three weeks, and his first outside Wales. Wherever he went in the world, Bill could always find a fellow Welshman.

Takoradi in the Gold Coast, now Ghana, was a strategically vital air base for the Allies. The southern ocean route from Europe to deliver aircraft to the forces in Egypt was long, so crated planes were landed at Takoradi, assembled there and flown across the Sahara Desert to Cairo. Between 1940 and 1943, 4500 airplanes from Britain and America were assembled and flown to Egypt by this route, together with 2200 US planes flown in via Ascension Island. Ocean Volunteer may well have been carrying aircraft as deck cargo.

14 Went ashore sightseeing to Sekondi and Accra. What sights??
Posted 3 letters
15 Heard of the Ocean Might's fate. Met survivors in Takoradi Hospital

SS Ocean Might was a sister ship, sunk by torpedo on 2 September 1942 near Takoradi, Ghana while transporting military stores to the Middle East. Almost all of the crew survived. This is the first mention in the log of a ship being sunk – Bill was to hear of many more during the voyage.

16 Left Takoradi (4pm 15th). 3 ships only. Risky. Doing 10 knots.
Crossed equator
17 Depth charges again. Jerry seems determined to have a go
18 Sighted Andoman Islands, South Atlantic. Weather glorious

Not the Andaman Islands, which are in the Bay of Bengal. Perhaps Annobon Island, south of Sao Tome in the Gulf of Guinea.
19 Sighted Belgian Congo. 2 ships left on our own now. 12 knots
20 Grey instead of blue water today (shallow). Nearing coast steering east by south
21 Sub-free waters, what a relief. Near St Helena and Ascension Island
22 Thinking of all at home as we bolt for the Cape

The Cape is the Cape of Good Hope, the most southerly point of Africa, near Cape Town. It is dominated by a flat-topped mountain called Table Mountain. When, as often happens, its summit is covered in cloud, the mountain is said to have its tablecloth on.

23 Sighted Ichabo Island (off the coast of Namibia). Not far to go
now
24 Stormy petrels, albatross and cape pigeons following the ship
25 Wrote my first letter to Kath. Hope all is well at home
26 Handed letters (3) to steward for posting on arrival

27 Hoping to arrive at Cape Town tomorrow
28 Cape Town. Glorious sight. Table Mountain complete with cloth

29 Still at anchor outside 2nd day. Saw seals, grampus (dolphin), diving birds
30 Still at anchor outside. Watching for shore lights. Town ablaze with lights

October

1 Landed at Cape Town. Sent cable. Met 6 Welsh boys. Sailed again 4pm
2 Tested DC gear last night. Off to Aden now. Weather grand

DC gear referred to the cranes and hoists attached to the ship used to handle deck and hold cargo.

3 Rounding Cape of Good Hope. Hugging coast all along
4 2 destroyers passed us. Saw Port Elizabeth lit up
5 Off Durban. Bombers over us want to know our nationality - in other words our flag is battle scarred

The flag of the British Merchant Navy is the Red Ensign,
often known by seamen as the red duster.

6 Albatross still following us. Steaming towards Mozambique Channel
7 No sign of land all day. We are in the Indian Ocean since Sunday
8 Terrific electrical storm passing Madagascar. Lightning playing on the ship
9 Storm on until 11am. Near Italian Somaliland. Tropical birds on deck
10 Nearing equator again. Getting very warm. Thinking a lot of home today. Will write some letters now
11 Weather very hot now. No sight of land, simply water and sky
12 Flying fish plentiful around here, hundreds flying around
13 Wish I had some more photographs. Hoping for mail at Aden Sunday

Mail bringing news from home was very important to sailors on long voyages. The Navy took great trouble to ensure it was delivered, but it was enormously difficult to know to which port to send the letters to ensure they met the ship, and there was a serious risk that the ship carrying mail would itself fail to reach its destination. As a result mail from home was quite a rare event.

14 Sighted sister ship on her way home off Mombasa. Crossed the line at mid-day

Crossing the equator is called crossing the line. Sailors often perform elaborate ceremonies to celebrate a first crossing of the line by a seaman, but this was Bill’s second crossing, and he was to do it twice more before returning home.

15 Heard of Duchess of Atholl and Euripides fate. Also air battle at Takoradi

SS Duchess of Atholl, a passenger ship carrying 845 passengers and crew, was en route from Cape Town on 10 October when she was attacked and sunk by a German submarine. Those aboard took to the lifeboats and sent SOS messages that were picked up, faintly as the batteries were fading, on Ascension Island. Nearby ships came to the rescue and all but four of the crew and all the passengers were rescued, after 28 hours in the lifeboats. There was no SS

Euripides in the area. However, the SS Examelia was sunk by a U-boat 27 miles south of the cape on 9 October, with the loss of 11 of her 51 crew.

16 Ed’s birthday. Many happy returns (thinking of all at home)

His older brother Edward.

17 Sighted Cape Gaurdufui, West Africa. Now off to the Gulf of Aden, Red Sea

Cape Gaurdufui, the tip of the Horn of Africa, now in Somalia.

18 Italian and British Somaliland. Saw English swallows. Heat terrific

It is unlikely these were English swallows as they travel down the west side of Africa to winter in the Cape. More likely they were from other parts of Europe, but even so they must have given Bill a real taste of home.

19 Arrived at Aden. What a dump! Smelling. In for repairs

Aden is a seaport in Yemen, at the foot of the Red Sea, but at the time was a British colony.

20 Still at Aden, doing choppy for changy with the bumboats

When ships are anchored in harbour in this part of the world, locals rowed out to them with local produce and souvenirs, which they sold to or exchanged with the crew.

21 Repairs to main engine and boilers. Still anchored in Aden

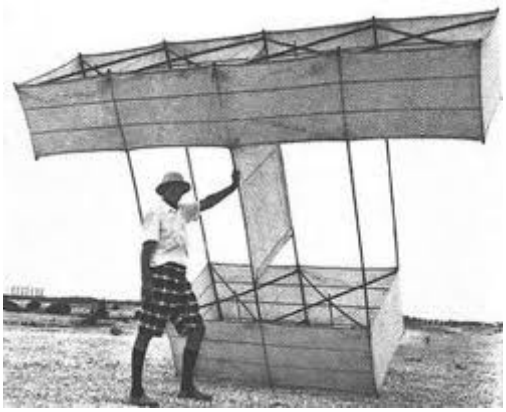
Although this ship was less than a year old, it had been built in a great hurry, and the engine was very unreliable.

22 Left Aden 10am for where - Sudan or Suez? Rumoured Port Darwin, Australia?

The crew were often not told the ship's destination until well after the ship had sailed. This reduced the chance that discussions about the destination would be overheard ashore and passed to the enemy. Bill would not have been allowed to mention where he was in letters home for the same reason.

23 Obviously Suez. Saw the 12 Apostles rocks and lighthouse. Heat terrific

24 Still in the Red Sea. Danger area for aircraft. Put up our kite



The barrage kite was an anti-aircraft device flown from merchant ships. It was tethered by a wire, which was invisible from a plane, but could rip off a wing or foul a propeller. Knowing that, enemy airmen kept their distance, and the ship was protected from attack.

25 Sailed through the Persian Gulf (actually the Red Sea), seeing Egypt and Arabia

26 Weather cooler as we enter Gulf of Suez. Few days more then?

27 Arrived and anchored at Sour Bay, Egypt. Glorious scenery especially at night
28 Arrived and anchored at somewhere in Syria. Destroyers waiting for us
29 Arrived at Port Tewfik and steamed up to Suez. Going up canal tomorrow
30 Arrived at Fanara, Egypt. Started discharging right away. Bitter Lakes

The Bitter Lakes are saltwater lakes that form the central section of the Suez Canal. The canal has no locks and seawater can flow freely through it, depending on the state of the tides in the Red Sea to the south and the Mediterranean at the northern end. Fanara was one of the Bitter Lakes ports that were the point of supply for the huge Allied Army, Navy and Air Force bases housing troops fighting the war in North Africa.
The ship had now delivered its supplies to these forces, so there was an opportunity for the crew to take some leisure time.

31 Went ashore, met 8 Welsh boys, had a nice night. Home 10pm

November

1 Went to Suez by lorry. Stayed the night at Bel-Air hotel. Sightseeing
2 Left for Cairo 8am. Had a marvellous day – Pyramids, Sphinx. Stayed at Port Faoud Hotel
3 Left for Ismailia. Spent day there. Had fine time sightseeing. Arrived ship 6pm
4 Stayed aboard today. Skipper going to log us for being a day adrift

Bill and his mates were a day late arriving back on the ship. This would have been recorded by the captain in the ship's official log and resulted in a fine for the crewmembers involved.

5 Jack's birthday. Many happy returns. Drank a beer as a toast to him with 4 other Welsh tommies (soldiers) in Naafi canteen. Kasfareet, Egypt via Treaty Road, Liberty Road. Watching bombers and fighters roar up into the blue

Treaty Road was built following the Anglo-Egyptian treaty of 1936. It ran from Ismailia to Alexandria along the banks of the Suez Canal.

The village of Kasfareet on this road was home to a large RAF base and airfield.

6 Went to Suez, Kubri, Genefe, Kabret, Sha Dun, Tel Akbar, Moascar
7 Left Fanara 10am. Arrived Suez 12pm. Anchored out in bay
8 Left Suez for Aden 6am. Weather very warm in Red Sea
9 Steering 13 knots through Red Sea. Are we bound for Durban and home?
10 Weather very warm. Thoughts all at home today of Edith and Kath
11 Thoughts again at home. Slightly homesick longing for the day
12 Bound for either Durban or Lourenco Marques, Portuguese East Africa

Lourenco Marques, now Maputo, is the capital of Mozambique, which was at the time a Portuguese colony.

13 Still in sight of land in Gulf of Aden. Getting hotter
14 Entered the Indian Ocean today. Durban in 12 days
15 Listened to the Victory bells from Llandaff. What would I give to be there?

In the early years of the war, the ringing of church bells was banned, so that they could be used as a signal for an invasion. The ban was lifted early in 1942, and on 15 October, bells were rung to celebrate the Allied victory at El Alamein, some 200 miles from the Bitter Lakes. This marked a significant turning point of World War II and was the first major victory by British Commonwealth forces over the German Army. Bill would have heard the bells broadcast on the BBC World Service.

16 Trying to think what Kath and Edith will be doing at this moment
17 Passed 3 ships laden with It-Ti prisoners (Italian prisoners captured during the desert war). First rain for weeks. Lovely
18 Crossing the equator as I write. Heat terrific. Sea like glass
19 Sea turned rough suddenly. Heard a sub warning and an SOS
20 Sea still rough. Ship pitching and rolling like the Divil (devil)
21 Auxiliary cruiser signalling us frantically? Saw an albatross
22 Heard of the fate of 4 ships. Sub operating somewhere near us!!!?
23 Saw the finest sunset - indescribable! Wishing Edith and Kath could see it

24 Getting into Lourenco Marques tomorrow. Roll on Durban and
home
25 Steaming into Delagoa Bay. Arrived at Lourenco Marques 10pm.
Neutral
26 Anchored out in basin. Went ashore at 6pm. Lights ablaze. No
blackout
27 Stayed aboard. Very pretty place. Full of 5th Columnists.
Warned

Lourenco Marques was a neutral port, keeping the ship safe from enemy attack. But it was also an ideal place for enemy agents, or fifth columnists, to pick up information about Allied shipping movements, and the crew were warned against indiscrete talk while ashore. In June, the Admiralty had announced that "it should be assumed that all information regarding allied shipping to and from Lourenco Marques, together with ports of origin and destination and details of cargo, will be accurately repeated to the enemy, as the port is one of the most active enemy intelligence centres in the world."

28 Went ashore, buying souvenirs. Went to Mission. Padre from Caernarvon

The Missions to Seamen was a charity formed in 1856 to provide Christian fellowship and support to sailors around the world. It opened a number of new Missions during the war, including one in Halifax, Nova Scotia that Bill was later to visit. In 2000 it changed its name to The Mission to Seafarers, reflecting the growing number of female mariners.

The Mission logo was a familiar and welcome sight to sailors throughout the world

29 Stayed at Brittania Hotel. Met survivors. Had a grand time. Port
closed. Aboard 3pm
30 Went alongside. 12 ships sunk, looking black for us! Received 3
letters – one of the happiest moments of my life

December

1 Nova Scotia got the hammer. Rumoured we are off to the States!
I hope not. I must write a few letters just in case of accident!

The sinking of SS Nova Scotia by U-boat was South Africa's worst naval disaster. The ship had sailed from Italian East Africa, with 765 Italian prisoners of war, 134 British and South African guards, and 118 crew aboard. She was torpedoed three times and sank within minutes. 194 people were rescued, but the rest lost their lives. The U-boat captain surfaced to try to identify the ship he had sunk, but would only rescue two survivors for intelligence purposes, despite the majority of them being German allies. He was following orders, as nearby less than a month earlier, a number of U-boats had been attacked and destroyed by Allied aircraft while assisting Italian survivors from a ship they had sunk.

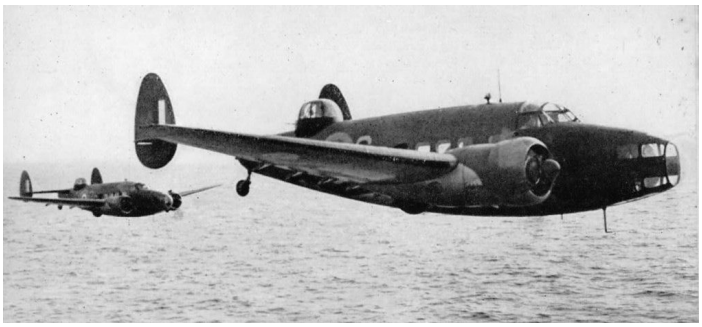
2 Went ashore with Hickson. Had a nice time discussing wives, children and home
3 Stayed aboard. My photographs are a certain cure for depression, lovely
4 Subs very active. Waiting outside. Llandaff Castle, Evanthia torpedoed

Llandaff Castle was an ocean liner serving as a troopship. It was torpedoed and sunk 100 miles southeast of Lourenco Marques on 30th November 1942. Only three lives were lost. SS Evanthia was a Greek Cargo Steamer torpedoed on 28th November. All her crew were saved.

5 Went ashore with PO (Petty Officer). Had a very nice time sightseeing
6 Went ashore after dinner. Pictures (cinema) at night, Hixson and
myself
7 Thinking of Edith and Kath all day. Mixed (Christmas) puddings –
not like Mum's
8 Went ashore for last time. Spent night at the Mission. Quite enjoyable
9 Left quay. Anchored in mid-stream, 12 hours notice. Don't know
when we sail
10 Still keeping anchor watches. Anxious to get cracking!!!

While under way, a ship's crew was divided into three watches that took it in turns to work four-hour duty shifts. While the ship was at anchor or in port, watch duties were much less onerous.

11 Spent a few pounds on presents etc for home. Getting Kath's at
Durban
12 Had grand time at Mission. Met Capt Novals and Chief Mate.
Sailing
13 Shore leave cancelled. Subs sank Panamanian outside.
Looking
Rough
14 Sailed in convoy of 10. Escort 1 destroyer, 2 corvettes 6
Hudsons. Making sure



The Lockheed Hudson was an American built light bomber, regularly used for convoy protection duties.

15 Safe so far. 6 knot convoy. Risky. Passing Natal as I write,
Durban tomorrow

Six knots was slow, but in order to keep together, the convoy had to sail at the speed of the slowest ship.

16 Arrived Durban. Not staying long, leaving tomorrow 6pm for
the
Cape
17 Had a look around. Anxious to get cracking. Left Durban
6pm
18 Sailing alone. Bit risky. Subs about. Passing East London.
Glorious weather
19 Passed Port Elizabeth. Collected all my presents and put
them in a
handy place to grab
20 Arrived safely Cape Town 7pm. What a relief, or is it my luck
still
holding?
21 Anchored outside. Working on main engine. In bad shape,
lots of
work on it
22 Thinking of Edith and Kath all day as Xmas nears. Going
alongside
today
23 Went ashore to the Mission. Gave us an amazing reception

24 Xmas Eve!! Thoughts concentrated on Kath and Edith. How I wish
I was there!
25 Morning Service 8.15. Invited out to Rondebosch for day. Marvellous, 12 noon!!!!!

Rondebosch is a residential suburb of Cape Town. Wherever they went, British merchant seamen found a warm welcome with local sympathisers, and were often invited to their homes. It was at Rondebosch that Bill was introduced to eating cheese with apples, and the oft-repeated couplet - "An apple pie without the cheese
Is like a kiss without a squeeze"

26 Met North Walian. Gave us a marvellous time. Invited us home.
Homesick
27 Invited to Rondebosch again. Church and Carol Service in the
evening
28 Pictures at Mission. Spent a quiet day sightseeing. Thoughts home
29 Mail aboard, none for me – disappointed. Wondering how Xmas
went at home

30 Finished early. Invited out - didn't go. Home thoughts too attractive
31 New Year's Eve. God bless my wife and girl in 1943. Party at Mission, Service afterwards

January 1943

1 My waking thoughts. Happy New Year to both my darlings. May it
be best ever
2 Ashore in Cape Town, sightseeing. Kloof Nek Mountain
3 Ashore again. Glorious weather. Went to Camps Bay – lovely

Kloof Nek and Camps Bay are suburbs of Cape Town.

4 Thoughts all at home today. Hoping we are sailing for home
5 Last night ashore. Pictures - Yankee Doodle Dandy (a 1942 film
starring James Cagney). Quite enjoyable
6 Out on trials today. Anchored alongside the Queen Mary

RMS Queen Mary was a Cunard cruise liner launched in 1936. When she was requisitioned at the outbreak of war as a troopship, she was the holder of the Blue Riband for the fastest crossing of the Atlantic.

7 Still at anchor outside. Will leave any moment now - for where???
8 Left Cape Town 6am for America, South Brazil. New 2nd (Mate)
and Donkey (boiler man). Trimmer short
9 Sailing along African coast for a few days. Real English weather,
cold and misty
10 Weather still cold and misty. Home in 2 months. Longing to see
my angels
11 Bound for Bahia first, then New York and home. Roll on England
12 Thoughts all home with the finest ladies in the land. How I love
them!!
13 No sign of land for 4 days. Hoping to arrive S America about 25th
14 Engine in bad state. Doubts as to whether she can take us across
15 Weather very hot near equator. Flying fish about
16 Engines on stop! 2000 miles from anywhere. Hard at repairs
17 Engines repaired. Away again. Weather still very hot
18 Subs and raiders (enemy surface warships) operating in these
waters. Getting risky
19 Sub warnings received again. News that 1 raider scuttled herself
20 Anniversary Eve. How I long for home and my darlings!!! George's
accident

The identity of George and the nature of his accident remains a mystery, although it was serious enough to require hospital attention.

21 6th wedding anniversary. Thoughts all with my darling wife
22 Hope to arrive at Bahia, Brazil tomorrow. Taking George ashore
23 Took George to hospital. Glad I am fit and well. Skipper and
lookout sighted sub tailing us - our speed saved us!!!

German U-boats could easily outpace the ship on the surface, but submerged with just a periscope above the water, they were limited to 8 knots.

24 Bahia and San Salvador, land of haciendas and carioca. Gorgeous
illumination

Salvador, or Sao Salvador, capital of the state of Bahia in Brazil, was at the time often known as Bahia. It was an important port for the export of minerals, and was known for its easygoing population and countless popular outdoor parties. Carioca people are the inhabitants of Brazil, and haciendas their estates. Bill was clearly proud to learn some words of the local language. The weather is hot and humid throughout the year.

25 Weather extremely hot, nearing equator again. Thoughts all home
26 Left San Salvador. 8 knot convoy, 20 ships and escort of 3 and
plane

The convoy route from Bahia to Trinidad had only recently been set up. When the route was more established it suffered more frequent attacks, and eight ships were lost in the spring of 1943.

27 Depth charges dropped 2am. Sub chasing us. Bound for Dutch
Guiana (now Suriname)
28 Depth charges again, looking awkward. Sleeping with clothes on
29 Depth charges again. Looks as tho Jerry will have a go this time
30 Escort increased. Destroyers and cruiser. Must be somat about
31 My thoughts all with my darling Edith and sweet Kath

February

1 Convoy scattered. Sub attack. Unsuccessful, Thank God!
2 Saw sailfish, flying fish and sharks. Still tailed by Jerry
3 Steaming across the Amazon River. What sights. Glorious
4 Steaming towards Panama Canal. Fireflies and mosquitoes
5 Arrived safely at Parimaribo, Dutch Guiana. Customs searching
ship
6 Glorious sights here. Wishing Edith and Kath were here
7 Left Panama for Trinidad, West Indies. 12 sunk. Dangerous area
8 Saw some of Jerry’s handiwork - sunken ships. Risking it alone
9 Anchored off a West Indian island safely

10 Finished loading. Thinking of my Edith and Kath all day
11 Aboard working. Stayed ashore at night in the Mission
12 Spent day at cricket match. Trinidad and Barbados. 2 centuries –
grand
13 Trip to Marval, San Juan, Santa Cruz. What sights. Fruit plantations!!! Holy Trinity morn cathedral church

Holy Trinity is the cathedral in Port of Spain, Trinidad, Marvel, San Juan and Santa Cruz are tourist destinations. Bill has his dates slightly adrift here. The cricket match began on Saturday 13th Feb, when two centuries were indeed scored by Trinidad, and the cathedral service would have been on Sunday 14th.

14 Ashore all day sightseeing. Weather extremely hot
15 Aboard working. Weather very hot. Repairs all round
16 Worried over bombs on S Wales. Hope all at home are OK. God
bless them all
17 Still at Trinidad. Weather very hot. Starting watches tomorrow
18 Left Trinidad. 40 ships bound for New York. Dangerous trip
19 Destroyers open fire on subs and depth charges. Slept well
20 Weather still very hot. In the Caribbean Sea. Subs still about

21 Destroyers still sub-chasing. More escort arrive. Thinking of Edith and Kath
22 Depth charges and gunfire. Emergency manoeuvres. Passing Haiti
Quite close
23 Sub's periscope spotted. Destroyers chasing him. Passing Cuba
and Jamaica. Lights on the coast

24 Dud's birthday. Hope all are well. Passing the Bahamas. Weather
Warm

Bill and his brothers always called their father Dud.

25 Off coast of Florida, USA. Thinking of my darling Edith and Kath
26 Passing the Bahamas. Tanker opened fire on sub last night. Weather warm
27 Terrible gale. Lifelines rigged. Waves 60-80 ft high. No cooking

Lifelines are safety barriers rigged in high seas to prevent crewmembers from falling or being washed over the side. With the

ship pitching and rolling so much, cooking would have been impossible.

28 Gale still on. Shipping seas nearly mast-high. Some excitement!!!

March

1 St David's Day. Thoughts all home with my darling Edith and Kath
2 Arriving New York today. Weather cold, morning frost. Sub about. Depth charges
3 Arrived New York. Saw Liberty, Atlantic City, Staten Island, Show Boats, snow BRR!
4 Ashore. Times Square, Broadway, Dempsey's. Presents for my angels. Mail

Dempsey's was a restaurant on Broadway owned by Jack Dempsey, the world heavyweight-boxing champion. It featured in the film The Godfather, but closed in 1974.

5 Ashore. Broadway. All skyscrapers - Chrysler, Empire State, First National. Staten Island
6 Ashore. 42nd St. Amazing sight. Lights all lit up. Times Square, Park Ave, Jersey City

Bill had six extended periods of shore leave during this voyage: in Egypt, Lourenco Marques, Cape Town, Trinidad, New York and Portland Maine. Before the war he had probably never left Wales, and the sights he saw on this and subsequent voyages remained with him for the rest of his life. After the war it would be fifteen years before he went overseas again

7 Stayed aboard all day. Had a good rest thinking of my darlings
8 Ashore. Brooklyn. Saw Normandie and Richelieu and Dunkerque.
What a size!!

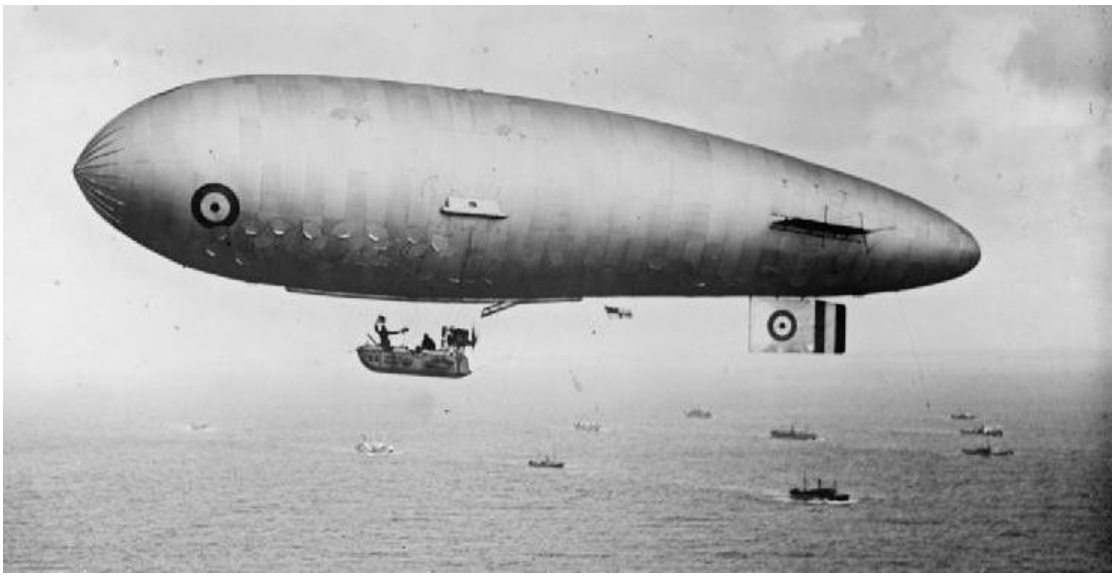
All three were French battleships. Richelieu fought with the Vichy French in the early years of the war but transferred to the Allies when French forces in West Africa joined them in 1942. Richelieu sailed to the US Navy yard in Brooklyn for a refit, which was in progress at the time of Bill's visit. Normandie was seized by the Americans in New York harbour at the start of the war. She sank there in 1942 following a fire but her hull had been salvaged. The third ship was not the battleship Dunkerque, which had been sunk at Toulon in 1942, but may have been the Dixmude, which was being refitted in New York at the time. In identifying the ships Bill would have been reliant on information from others, since warships do not have their names painted on them.

9 Weather milder. Real spring. Hope to be home 4 weeks from today
10 Queen Elizabeth right at our side. Finest ship in the world!!!

RMS Queen Elizabeth, the sister ship of the Queen Mary, was built as an ocean cruise liner for the Cunard Line. She was launched in 1938 and first saw service as a troop ship. She was the largest passenger liner ever built at that time and for fifty-six years thereafter, but it was not until 1946 that she commenced work as a cruise liner.

11 Ashore sightseeing. Grand Central Station, Park Ave, Brooklyn
Bridge etc
12 Last day ashore, Leaving tomorrow for Portland, Maine. Home in
3 weeks
13 Sailed 2am. Snowing. Passing Long Island. Saw sub, battle
cruisers, destroyers
14 Arrived Cape Cod Canal. Marvellous scenery. Blimp escort

Since entering the war in 1941, the US Navy had established an extensive program for the construction of helium-filled balloons supporting a capsule for crew. These airships, or blimps, spotted U-boats and called up attacking forces. They were extremely effective at protecting convoys near the coast; of the over 70,000 ships in convoys protected by blimps, only one was sunk by a submarine while under blimp escort.



An Atlantic convoy under blimp escort.

15 Arrived Portland, Maine. Shopping and sightseeing. More presents.
Mission sending letters
16 Ashore. Cold terrific. Below. Mission and more presents - very
enjoyable
17 Merchant Navy Club. Enjoyable evening. Entertainments
18 Ashore. Met 2 Welsh lads - 1 Swansea 1 Lampeter. Grand time
19 Thinking of all at home as I study the shop windows
20 Leaving today for New York again, then home and my angels Edith
and Kath
21 On our way to New York for convoy. Weather much milder
22 Arriving New York tomorrow. Caught a bad cold. Stiff and sore
23 Arrived New York. Cold worse. Thinking of my sweethearts
24 Anchored out. Cold improving. Hope to see my darlings about
April 10th
25 Sailed today for home and Edith and Kath. Not concerned about
subs now!

There must have been an element of wishful thinking in this entry. The Battle of the Atlantic was at its height, and March 1943 represented the rock bottom of Allied fortunes; 97 ships were sunk in the North Atlantic in the first twenty days of the month, and Allied Command was considering abandoning the convoy system altogether. However, by May, due to the introduction of a range of new technologies, the Allies had largely won the Battle of the Atlantic, and although Bill was to cross the Atlantic ten times more, this crossing was by far the most hazardous.

26 All quiet. Weather mild. 1 ship adrift. Passing Halifax, Canada

An Atlantic convoy gathering at Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Convoy HX231, comprising 61 ships, assembled off Halifax, Nova Scotia, to sail to Belfast, where the ships would disperse to their destinations. Many of the ships were carrying fuel of various sorts, but others carried butter, lead, timber, meat and mail. Ocean Volunteer was laden with grain.

27 Still all quiet. Weather changing. Hope to be home on 8th April

28 Weather rainy and wind. Still making good progress. Thinking of home

29 Storm broke last night. Terrific gale raging all day. Off Greenland

An Atlantic convoy in typical storm conditions.

30 Storm still on. Convoy all over the show. Keeping up well. Home!!!!

At this point, south of Newfoundland, the convoy was joined by British Escort group B-7, comprising the the frigate Tay, destroyer Vidette, and corvettes Alisma, Loosestrife, Pink and Snowflake

HMS Tay, the leader of the escort group would have been a welcome sight to the crews of the merchant ships in the convoy.

By intercepting, though not decoding, enemy submarine radio transmissions, Allied intelligence in Newfoundland reckoned there were 59 U-boats in the North Atlantic at the time, including a number on the proposed route of the convoy, so the route was changed to skirt the area.

31 Storm still on. Wind and waves. Ship covered with ice. Severely
cold

April

1 Arthur's birthday. Thoughts all at home. Weather pretty rough.
Sub alarm
2 My birthday. Bet Edith, Kath, Mum and Dud are thinking of me.
Bless them
3 Storm abating. Sun breaking thro. Ship still rolling. Bless my
ladies
4 Glorious morning. Got the Channells (sailing orders). Packing and
thinking of home

Early on April 4th, the German submarine command ordered 14 of their submarines to form a group, code-named Lowenherz, or Lionheart, and to attack convoy HX231.
The Germans employed a complex coding system using a machine called Enigma to communicate naval orders.. They considered the code to be unbreakable, and so communicated freely with their submarines and surface ships. However, the British had assembled a team of mathematicians and crossword experts at Bletchley Park, Milton Keynes with the sole aim of breaking the cipher, and early in 1941 they succeeded. But the tactical utility of this information depended on the speed at which the messages could be decoded and passed to the decision makers. Although the Allies intercepted and decoded the German order, the message did not reach the convoy escort until April 6th, by when it was too late. However, the Newfoundland intelligence reports caused the Allied command to dispatch a Support Group of four destroyers to rendezvous with the convoy in mid-Atlantic.
The Lowenherz group made contact with the convoy at 12.24 on April 4th, and was quickly reinforced by another six submarines, bringing the total attack force to twenty.
The allies had just begun to install High Frequency Direction Finding equipment (Huff-Duff) on convoy escort ships, enabling them to get much more accurate triangulation fixes on U-boats transmitting from over the horizon, beyond the range of radar. This allowed hunter-killer ships and aircraft to be dispatched at high speed in the direction of the U-boat, which could be found by radar if still on the surface and by sonar if it had dived. Huff-Duff proved highly successful against shadowing U-boats, which needed to send radio homing signals at regular intervals to guide other U-boats. It was this signal the escorts could systematically track down and then attack the U-boat responsible. Often this was enough to sink the U-boat or cause it to lose contact with the convoy, which could make evasive manoeuvres when the U-boat had been forced to dive.

HMS Tay was one of only two ships in the North Atlantic to be equipped with Huff-Duff and used it very effectively during the next 36 hours to chase off attackers, but with only six warships searching for twenty
U-boats it was inevitable that some subs would break through.

5 Sub attack 10.30pm. 2 sunk - Larangi and D Crown. Awful sight.
On deck in life belt all day (this and the next three entries are all
dated one day later than the events they describe, and the ships are misnamed – understandable in the circumstances).

The first ship hit was in fact SS Shillong, a British merchantman, which was torpedoed at 22.08 and quickly sank. As there was no rescue ship with the convoy, one of the warships was detailed to search for survivors. It failed to locate any men and after a five-hour search returned to continue protecting the convoy. 40 of the Shillong crewmembers drowned at the scene. 38 escaped in a liferaft, but by the time they were found by another convoy rescue ship over a week later, only seven were still alive; the rest had died from exposure.
SS Waroonga, a merchant ship that had broken away from the convoy, was then hit by a torpedo. Crewmembers were evacuated but the ship was badly damaged and was later deliberately sunk by HMS Loosestrife.
The convoy changed course a number of times but the German U-boats continued the attack. During the night, four other ships romped, the term used for leaving the convoy; three of them were sunk by torpedo and the fourth later returned to the protection of the escort.

6 Another attack, 12 noon. Tanker torpedoed - British Ardour. 2
(ships) missing (from the convoy). Up again all night

The next day, two British VLR (very long range) Liberator heavy bombers arrived from Iceland. While they were overhead, U-boats were reluctant to communicate attack plans. If they had, their radio transmissions would have allowed Huff-Duff locations from HMS Tay to be used by the aircraft to locate and attack them. However, by nightfall, the planes had returned to Iceland, and the attack continued.
Despite the presence of the planes, British Ardour, the convoy refuelling tanker, was torpedoed and caught fire. HMS Snowflake picked up her crew, but despite repeated attempts was unable to sink the burning vessel. It was subsequently torpedoed and sunk by HMS Vidette.

7 Collision, 12.30am. Tanker rammed us. Thought we were torpedoed. All at lifeboat stations

8 Subs still around. In lifebelts. Up all night. Flares and depth charges

During these two days, the escort tactics were effective in keeping the U-boats at bay by using sonar or Huff-Duff contacts to attack them, then quickly returning to protect the convoy. They were assisted by up to five Liberator aircraft and the Support Group of four destroyers which had now arrived after refuelling in Iceland. No further ships were attacked.

The attack on Convoy HX231 by the Lowenherz U-boat group took place in the Western Approaches, south of Iceland and west of Ireland, and extended over 700 miles of ocean. Six ships were sunk, and a further three damaged. The Liberator bombers eventually sank two of the
U-boats, and under increasing harassment from the escort, the German attack was called off. Over three hundred lives in total had been lost on both sides.

The tactics successfully used for the first time by the Allies in this operation were those used to defeat the U-boats along the North Atlantic convoy routes over the next few months. By May so many U-boats were being lost that they were withdrawn from the North Atlantic, allowing the troops and supplies needed for the eventual invasion of France on D-Day to flood into Britain.

9 Quiet night. Sighted shores of Ireland 3.30pm. Bound for Belfast

10 Belfast. Bound for Bristol. Steaming through Irish Channel

11 Sighted Llandudno. Anchored off Barry roads. Home at last. Now for my Edith

Roads are sheltered waters near the shore where ships can anchor safely.

12 Docked at Avonmouth. Now for Neath. Returning to the finest wife in the world – the final entry in the log.

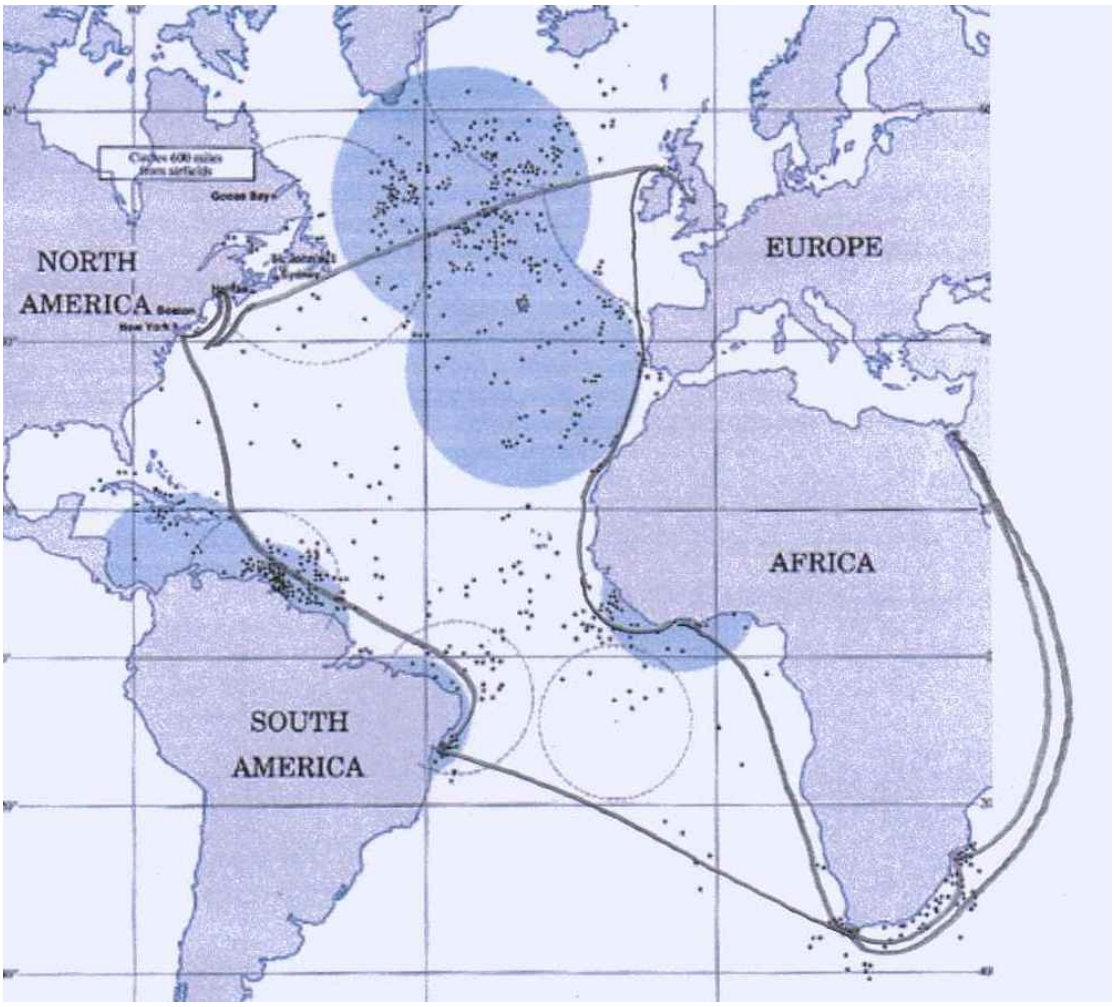
Bill’s first voyage as a merchant seaman had lasted almost eight months, and had taken him from Europe to nine countries in Africa, Asia and North and South America. It covered almost 25000 miles, much of it without the protection of escort vessels or aircraft.

He then served on four other ships crossing the North Atlantic before joining SS Edward F Johnson, a kerosene tanker, in April

1944. During this last voyage he circumnavigated the world. He crossed the Atlantic three times, navigated the Suez and Panama Canals, visited numerous ports in The Middle East, India, the Far East and Australasia, and finally arrived home almost two years later. He began as a stoker, and ended as 5th engineer officer. During his wartime service he had only seen his wife and young daughter five times for a total of four months in three and a half years, but this last voyage was by far their longest separation. In all Bill sailed in 17 convoys and numerous independent voyages. Although they were found and followed by submarines on many occasions, only once, in the Western Approaches in April 1943, was his ship or convoy successfully attacked.

During the war, over 36,000 seamen lost their lives aboard the 3,500 British merchant ships that were sunk, 365 ships during the period of this voyage. That is one in five men of all who served, a higher proportion than any of the other services. Bill sailed on six ships during the war; three had been damaged by torpedo, mine or aircraft bombing before he joined them, and one was sunk by torpedo after he had moved to another ship. Bill could certainly count himself among the lucky ones.

SS Ocean Vanguard, a sister ship of SS Ocean Volunteer, at sea during the war



This map shows the extent of merchant shipping losses in the area and at the time of Bill's first voyage. Each black dot represents a ship sunk by enemy action, the vast majority by submarine.

Bill's memories of his war service remained with him for the rest of his life. He wore his Merchant Navy blazer and tie with pride at every opportunity and often referred to himself as an old sailor.

Bill safely back at home with Edith and Kath.